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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7621>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

« J. M. Gratale on N. Coles' s *Interpreting Political Events in the United States* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2009, document 13, Online since 09 September 2009, connection on 24 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7621>

This text was automatically generated on 24 April 2019.

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- 1 Norman Coles. *Interpreting Political Events in the United States: Critical Debate and Representative Democracy*. Sussex Academic Press, 2009, 79pp.
- 2 At first glance, two things struck me about Norman Coles's volume. The first is its rather long title, whereas the second point concerns the book's length; including the appendices, bibliography and index, it amounts to only seventy-nine pages. In the first case, long titles are not necessarily problematic, providing the narrative which follows measures up to the ambitions alluded to on the book's cover. Regarding the latter observation, while brevity is always essential and welcome, there is the potential of neglecting coverage of pertinent issues the author sets out to address in his study.
- 3 According to Coles the main concern of his volume is to focus on "important political issues and events which are hard to understand not only because of their complex circumstances, but also because commentary and contemporary understanding are often at odds with the results of philosophical analysis" (viii). It seems to me that within the realm of political history there is bound to be 'complexity,' nuanced approaches, and a range of interpretation. I suppose the *twist* Coles is applying relates to the notion of deploying "philosophical analysis" to a number of case-studies centered on America's political-historical development. More troubling is another statement in his preface which I cannot resist from quoting in full. It reads: "I'm not a professional historian, what I say should where appropriate be checked and if necessary corrected or even discarded, if scrutiny by historians shows it inaccurate" (xi), (so much for the *authority* of the author). It is an unfortunate admission for Coles to make that his book is not the result of rigorous research and attention to the details of history. Leaving behind this less than promising start Coles's opening chapter provides coverage of the U.S. Bill of Rights followed by five chapters titled as follows: President Andrew Johnson, Whittaker Chambers, Alger Hiss, President George W. Bush, and "The War on Terror." Broadly speaking, Coles's volume addresses three main political terrains: the period of Reconstruction, the Red Scare, and the 'War on Terror.' Three appendices are included;

the first is a list of five books for recommended reading, followed by an appendix which includes a copy of the U.S. Constitution, whereas the third is the U.S. Bill of Rights.

- 4 To get right to the point I find this volume to be unremarkable. In essence it is not a *book*, but rather an extended essay. Although the initial chapter on the Bill of Rights provides a helpful survey of that document's key elements, Coles's discussion becomes highly legalistic. Excessive attention to Article II 'the right to bear arms' and Article VIII 'cruel and unusual punishment,' at best seems somewhat misplaced in relation to his subsequent chapters and the narrative at large. Coles begins his case-study approach with an analysis of President Andrew Johnson's administration following the Civil War, a period commonly referred to as Reconstruction. Despite the author's claim that his focus is on "political issues and events" it becomes apparent that his narrative collapses into establishing character-personality profiles. While there is a more agreeable balance between the study of historical personalities and the larger historical context in the chapter on the Johnson administration, succeeding chapters fall victim to the former approach. To his credit in this first case-study, there is ample and meaningful discussion of the Reconstruction period, constitutional issues, African-American suffrage, and white southern resistance to socio-political change, despite inadequate coverage of certain policies such as the Freedman's Bureau. Such minor oversights pale in comparison to what awaits the reader in his chapters on Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss.
- 5 In many respects, these two chapters are part of a single topical issue—the Red Scare of the 1950s. Unfortunately Coles does not provide any historical context for the developments of that period. We have no provision for America's long history of anti-radicalism, no reference to the first Red Scare following World War One, and most remarkable no mention of the exploits of Senator Joseph McCarthy (McCarthyism) who is so closely identified with the anti-communist hysteria of the early fifties. In place of discussing the unconstitutional practices of McCarthy and HUAC (The House Committee on Un-American Activities), Coles chooses to provide character analyses of Chambers and Hiss. Consider his opening sentence: "Whittaker Chambers became famous for three main reasons" (27) followed up by an outlined list, (a strategy used by the author throughout which is painfully unappealing for the reader). Another strategy present in his narrative is his application of deductive reasoning, and his articulation of analytical logic, again present in outlined format. Ultimately what Coles establishes is that the historical record is unclear and that it is difficult to ascertain the nature and extent of these individuals' commitment to the communist ideology. As Coles remarks, his "point is only that less may be known about some social interactions of importance than we 'naturally' suppose" (43). Once more, such observations seem to be self-evident and somewhat frivolous.
- 6 The final two chapters bring the reader to the present through an analysis of President George W. Bush's 'War on Terror.' Coles's focus is on the executive branch's use and application of power, specifically in the context of America's invasion of Iraq in 2003. Along with his discussion of executive power in the realm of foreign policy and the constitutional limits thereof, is consideration of the role of vice-president. In short, Coles correctly asserts that the role of Congress should be more instrumental as it pertains to declaring war, whereas the office of the vice-president should have far less of a role in shaping foreign policy. For the related chapter on "The 'War on Terror'" there is extended focus on semantics, about five pages of it to be exact. Ever so gradually Coles explores the war in Iraq through varied lenses such as just war theory and ethics, as well

as the machinations of foreign policy. The conclusion the author finally makes is satisfactory. He states that "the exercise of political power cannot evade the moral and rational requirements that are one glory of true humanity" (59). With this hint of a cosmopolitical vision for the future Coles's narrative draws to an end.

- 7 In sum, this monograph of American democratic society is in many ways an incomplete work and a misconceived project. As noted at the beginning of this review, Coles's book is far too brief. Another shortcoming is his case-study selections which could have been more appealing. He ignores relevant socio-cultural developments from the sixties and seventies relating to free speech, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and the Nixon-Watergate scandal, all of which have a strong constitutional component. I also find it bewildering that the author fails to provide pertinent historical background for the reader who may require such information. Poor narrative style, an unappealing study-guide outline approach, excessive use of exclamation marks, a lack of scholarship, a dearth of footnotes and bibliography translates into an unrewarding reading experience and a book that falls short in far too many respects.

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